



### **'TIME OUT' IS 'TIME FOR'**

We all probably feel from time to time the need to get away from it all. Most often this is a result of life getting out of hand for us, and it all becoming a little too much. We long for a freedom from all the pressures that seem to impinge upon our time and energy. Space and freedom is a luxury few of us have, but we long for it often enough.

Though most often this longing comes about as simply the felt need to be free of the stress we might be experiencing, the spiritual tradition has long recognized the need for us to withdraw from time to time from our ordinary tasks and obligations to gain a certain perspective in order to hear ourselves more deeply, so that we can hear others more clearly and ultimately so that we can hear the presence of God more fully.

In the spiritual tradition the metaphor for this self-reflective space is the desert. In the Old Testament the people of Israel are called from time to time back into the desert from whence they came to remember again their identity and their covenant with God. Jesus himself withdraws from time to time to a lonely place and invites his disciples to join him there. "Time out" becomes the necessary corollary of "time for" all that life demands for us.

Allesandro Pronzato writes, "The desert is a good teacher. It is a place where we do not die of thirst. It is a place where we rediscover the roots of our existence." The same writer, however, helpfully reminds us, that, "the physical desert is not necessary to lead the life of a hermit. . . . You can find your desert in a corner of your house, on a motorway, in a square, in a crowded street. But you must first renounce the slavery of illusions, refuse the blackmail of pressure, resist the glitter of appearances, repudiate the domination of activity, reject the dictatorship of hypocrisy. Then the desert becomes a place where you do not go out to see the sand blowing in the wind but the Spirit waiting to make his dwelling within you."<sup>1</sup>

The insight of this writer is underscored by the insights of another contemporary writer, John Barbour. Barbour identifies very accurately how our normal roles and routines can leave us, "feeling trapped, bored, or overwhelmed by the demands and expectations of others."<sup>2</sup> But as he comments,

Solitude allows a person to focus on certain experiences and dimensions of reality with a fuller attention, a more complete concentration, than is possible when one must also attend to the reactions of other people<sup>3</sup>

And he goes on to teach,

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<sup>1</sup> Allesandro Pronzato, *Meditations on the Sand*

<sup>2</sup> John D. Barbour, *The Value of Solitude: The Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography*, (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Barbour, *The Value of Solitude*, 5.

Solitude becomes spiritual when breaking out of ordinary social interactions leads to a clearer knowledge of who one truly is and to a better relationship to reality in all its aspects, especially those that are perceived as most essential, valuable and life-affirming. . . . We need a balance between the active and contemplative, between encounter with another person and the need to recollect one's sense of selfhood apart from others<sup>4</sup>

Barbour concludes,

Few would quarrel with this generalization, but the details about how we each do this in our own lives are as interesting and various as our differing temperaments and needs.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Barbour is suggesting we all have to find what kind of solitude might be suitable and appropriate to us. The major insight I, personally, have gained from Barbour's study is that solitude does not necessarily mean being alone; it means giving over to those activities that are not simply role based and defined by the expectations of others. These are the activities and moments which give us a certain space in which our deepest sense of self, often hidden under the demands of our role and responsibilities, might emerge and come to the surface. Going out to dinner with friends, in this sense, can become an exercise of solitude!

What is the potential of these moments? The great spiritual writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Merton, suggests that in these moments and in these activities – whatever they might be uniquely for us – we have the best opportunity to move beyond the seduction of the illusions we have of ourselves, the glitter of appearances, to truly see others. As Merton writes,

It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have from them. It is pure affection, and filled with reverence for the solitude of others. Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say. Nor is it no longer a question of dishonoring them by accepting their fictions, believing in their images of themselves which their weakness obliges them to compose, in the wan work of communication.<sup>6</sup>

This is the greatest possibility given to us in the most genuine moments of solitude for us. Far from being moments of selfishness such moments open us out in sensitivity to the needs of others, to be genuinely responsive to all those we encounter in our life, both those we love and the stranger that encounters us.

Not surprising then that Dietrich Bonhoeffer could declare,

Let the one who cannot be alone beware of community. Let the one who is not in community beware of being alone."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Barbour, *The Value of Solitude*, 5, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Barbour, *The Value of Solitude*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Merton cited in *The True Solitude: Selections from the writings of Thomas Merton*, (Kansas City, Mo: Hallmark Editions, 1969), 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* cited in Barbour, *The Value of Solitude*, opening pages.